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Planning for the Worst: When Disaster Strikes

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What are the odds that any one of us will face a fire, earthquake, or some significant disaster in our professional careers or even our lifetimes? The odds that we will encounter serious injury or death as a result of some disaster are long, to say the least. According to one source, we have a greater chance of being injured by our toilet bowl cleanser (one in 10,000) than we do of being killed by a tornado in a given year (1 in two million). Despite such odds, we can lay a hefty wager that the librarians who faced disasters like the 1989 earthquake which destroyed the California State University at Northridge library, or the floods which wreaked havoc on the Colorado State University collection, would urge us all to take necessary precautions. Just because most of us will never endure the aftermath of a natural disaster does not mean we should take the old adage, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," lightly.

Although I have lived in regions of this country that have suffered from the impact of hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes, the libraries in which I worked never experienced any damage from natural disasters. The damage I have witnessed has mostly been the result of human error, especially error in taking proper preventative measures. At the University of Oregon in the late spring of 1999, contractors hired to repair perpetual leaks in the Science Library, an underground collection, might have been lulled into a sense of false security by the bright blue skies of summer. When our usually ubiquitous Northwest precipitation returned, the rain caused flooding that unfortunately damaged some expensive science journals and other materials.

For the past year, the University of Oregon Library has been working on a disaster response plan. Our project developed as a result of efforts within the university to establish a campus-wide plan. The Science Library flood was a wake-up call, but it did not precipitate the planning process. While the library's plan is not finished, we have completed a solid first draft. Our work must continue, but this draft will provide ample assistance in the event of an emergency.

During the planning process, one of our most valuable discoveries was the knowledge that there was no need to reinvent the wheel when developing a library disaster plan. In fact, our biggest challenge was combing through the vast amounts of available literature.

This multitude of accessible resources includes disaster-planning workbooks which allow librarians to simply fill in the blanks and, "Presto, instant disaster plan." One such printed source is the *Disaster Plan Workbook*, published by the Preservation Committee of the New York University Libraries 1984. The *Soaring to Excellence* program, part of a teleconference series for library professionals produced under the auspices of the College of DuPage in Illinois, also makes such a plan available at this site: <http://www.dupage.edu/soaring/disasterplan.html>. After going to this site, librarians can seek permission to copy the plan, and then proceed to fill in the blanks. A helpful series of publications is also available from the Northeast Document Conservation Center at this Web site: <http://www.nedcc.org/plam3/index3.htm>. The NEDCC makes its *Emergency Management Technical Leaflets* available for free as a reference tool for disaster planning and recovery.

As an academic library, we wanted to consult the completed plans of several university libraries. With their permission we also borrowed material from their plans. Most authors or compilers are very collaborative and willing to share their expertise. Since many libraries have mounted their plans on the Web, we made good use of these resources; two well-developed plans are from Indiana University (<http://www.indiana.edu/~libpres/plan/disaster.html>) and Tennessee Technological University (http://www2.tntech.edu/library/web_guides/displan.HTML). The one public library plan located on the Web belongs to the Beaufort County (South Carolina) Public Library: <http://www.co.beaufort.sc.us/library/Beaufort/emergency.htm>.

The University's Draft Plan

The University of Oregon Library's disaster plan includes the basic components found in similar documents:

Contacts for Types of Emergencies

A list of contacts for likely emergencies will help the library locate individuals or groups best suited to respond to a particular type of disaster. In some cases, these contacts may provide information or referral to another agency, rather than direct assistance. The list should be relevant to the area. For example, a library in southeastern Florida would want to include someone with knowledge of hurricanes and proper evacuation processes.

Members of the Disaster Response Team and Their Responsibilities

For many libraries, it will take the entire staff to put together a disaster response team. Some staff members may have to wear two hats at once. The team should be responsible for the following activities: coordinating and managing the library's response to the disaster; assessing damage to materials and equipment; recording

the damage, usually through photography; communicating appropriate news to library users, the campus or community, the media, and the profession at large; coordinating the transportation of materials and supplies and associated relocation activities; allocating and authorizing expenditures and use of staff resources; supervising volunteers or workers during the salvage phase; and designating priorities for salvage based on written guidelines and damage assessment.

Prevention/Protection Checklist

A prevention/protection checklist like the one available from Indiana University allows librarians to analyze potential risks to the staff, facilities, and collections, and to inspect areas to discover sources of possible catastrophes, such as poorly-ventilated rooms, flammable liquids, or leaks.

Building and Collection Contacts

Some libraries' holdings are spread across several buildings, or even districts. There may also be diverse collections throughout one building. A disaster plan should identify the relevant people to phone, especially in cases where the collection is not "officially" maintained by the library, or is in a building the library shares with another unit.

Priorities of Collection Salvage

What do I save first in a fire? *The Gutenberg Bible* or the *Meriwether Lewis Memoirs*? The answer is, "Neither." Evacuate the building first. Once it is safe to return, the established priorities will provide a guideline for what to salvage first. Here are some questions to ask when determining priorities:

- Is the item of local or regional importance?
- Can the item be replaced?
- What is the replacement cost?
- Is this cost affordable?
- Would replacing the item cost more or less than restoring it?
- What will insurance pay for—replacement or restoration?
- How important is the item to the collection or to researchers/users?

Building or Floor Plans

All staff and volunteers, in addition to members of rescue crews, fire fighting units and the police, should have access to the layout of the building. Staff and others should be able to quickly locate all fire extinguishers and alarms. Building plans should clearly label fire exits and alternate escape routes, and staff should become familiar with them.

List of Onsite and Offsite Supplies

Listing supplies allows librarians to identify necessary items for responding to various disasters and to estimate the costs for creating disaster kits from scratch. Almost all of the disaster planning guides that we examined recommended creating supply kits in advance and locating these in more than one place and/or within each branch for larger library systems. Most disaster planning guides also encourage librarians to locate supply kits offsite in case librarians are unable to gain access to the kits held within their library buildings.

Directory of Suppliers and Consultants

A list of suppliers and consultants provides easy reference to the company that can rent dehumidifiers or to the consultant who can explain what is necessary to salvage rare photographs.

Recovery Process for Library Materials, Furnishings and Artwork, and Computers

Not every library has the resources to create and maintain a Preservation Department like Harvard or Stanford. However, most of us can take advantage of these libraries' great resources to learn and plan how to salvage materials. For information on salvage methods for paper-based materials damaged by water, fire, insects, mold, etc., try this URL: <http://preserve.harvard.edu/procedures/salvage.html>. For information on salvaging other types of media, in addition to paper based materials, see the website for the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works that Stanford University sponsors: <http://aic.stanford.edu/>

Training, Prevention, and Review of Plan

All staff and volunteers should read and have access to the disaster plan. Training in disaster recovery techniques should be available to all staff members and mandatory reading for those individuals serving on your response team. Oregon groups addressing the broader issues of preservation could also offer some assistance or referrals regarding training and preparedness. Consult members of either the Oregon Library Association's Technical Services Round Table: <http://olaweb.org/org/tsrt.shtml> or the Orbis Preservation Committee: <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/orbis/OPC.html>. Both occasionally sponsor local and regional preservation workshops and presentations.

The goal of a disaster preparedness plan is to lessen the loss of, or damage to, library materials and other materials in the event that a disaster occurs. Prevention remains the biggest protection against sustaining significant damages. We cannot plan for every conceivable emergency, but by planning and orchestrating a careful, measured response, we can help our library staff be prepared to act quickly and efficiently in the event one occurs. ☐